RESEARCH

A REPORT OF THE
PLANNING AND RESEARCH BRANCH
MANITOBA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Public Attitudes
To Education

#84-06

Public Attitudes To Education

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PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO EDUCATION

SUMMARY

More than 1000 Manitobans were asked a series of questions about current educational issues. Highlights of the responses follow.

I. Quality of Education

Public perceptions of the quality of education are neither so positive as to be comfortable nor so negative as to be alarming. With the exception of high schools, where the concern is much stronger, there is considerable, if qualified, support for educational quality.

II. Funding of Education

Education is seen as reasonably well funded at present in Manitoba. There is no public support for increased spending on education, and equally little support for a reduction in education spending.

III. Special Programs

There is strong public support for new initiatives in the areas of Heritage Language and sex education. There is strong public support for programs for special needs students, but widespread ignorance about the current status of such programs.

IV. Public Involvement

There is strong support for increased public involvement in education.

V. Post-Secondary Accessibility and Continuing Education

Most Manitobans believe that there is presently good accessibility to post-secondary education. There is a large demand for adult education, concentrated among those who are already most affluent and educated.

Manitoba
Education
Planning and
Research

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L'ATTITUDE DU PUBLIC ENVERS L'ÉDUCATION

RÉSUMÉ

On a posé une série de questions à plus de 1 000 Manitobains concernant les problèmes éducatifs actuels. Voici les traits saillants de leurs réponses :

I. Qualité de l'enseignement

Le public considère que la qualité de l'enseignement n'est pas assez positive pour être satisfaisante ni assez négative pour être alarmante. Sauf en ce qui concerne les écoles secondaires qui suscitent des inquiétudes plus vives, les personnes averties appuient fortement la qualité de l'enseignement.

II. Financement de l'éducation

Selon les personnes interrogées, le financement actuel de l'éducation au Manitoba est raisonnable. Le public n'envisage ni l'augmentation ni la diminution des fonds consacrés à l'éducation.

III. Programmes spéciaux

Le public est très en faveur d'innovations dans les domaines des langues ancestrales et de l'éducation sexuelle. Le public est aussi très en faveur de programmes destinés aux élèves ayant des besoins spéciaux, mais il ignore généralement l'état actuel de ces programmes.

IV. La participation du public

Le public est très en faveur d'accroître sa participation dans l'éducation.

V. L'accessibilité à l'enseignement postsecondaire et l'éducation permanente

La plupart des Manitobains croient que l'enseignement postsecondaire actuel est convenablement accessible. Il existe une forte demande dans le domaine de l'éducation des adultes, celle-ci étant plus prononcée parmi les personnes aisées et instruites.

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

Education is usually thought of as a public good; an activity undertaken for the benefit of the society as a whole as well as for the benefit of individuals. Moreover, the public - as parents, as taxpayers, as students, and as citizens - has, through various levels of government, considerable influence over the nature of schools.

It is therefore important for all those involved with education, to have a clear sense of public attitudes on key educational issues. With this in mind, the Manitoba Department of Education undertook a survey-based study of public attitudes to some major current educational issues. The intent is to make such studies a regular part of the operation of the Department on an annual or biennial basis.

Scope and Format of the Report

This report provides results of the survey of public attitudes together with an analysis of the significance of these results. Throughout the report the emphasis is on the meaning rather than merely on the presentation of the data. The intent is to raise for the reader significant implications of the information.

The questions asked have been divided into a number of major categories:

- Quality of education
- Funding of education
- Special programs
- Public involvement
- Post-secondary accessibility and continuing education

The report will review results in each section.

Responses were analyzed by age, gender, place of residence (Winnipeg-other), level of education, and presence of students in the household. Significant differences in responses for these subgroups are noted in the report; where no differences are noted, it means that there was no significant variation in responses based on these factors.

The latter part of the report contains information on the characteristics of respondents and the methods used in the study. The reader may want to consult these before reading the report.

Responses from Readers

Your comments on any aspect of the study or this report are welcome. Please address your comments to:

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I. QUALITY OF EDUCATION

Summary: Public perceptions of the quality of education are neither so positive as to be comfortable nor so negative as to be alarming. With the exception of high schools, where the concern is much stronger, there is considerable, if qualified, support for educational quality.

Quality is a difficult concept to measure. No single question, or even a set of questions, will provide a definitive view of people's sense of the quality of education. Nonetheless, the study sought to assess views about quality from several perspectives.

- Respondents were asked to give a grade (A to F) for each level of education, from elementary to post-secondary. This question was also asked in the United States Gallup Poll on education, and was included here for comparison purposes.

- Respondents were asked to compare schools in Manitoba today with schools in other provinces, and to school when they were students.

- Because of oft-voiced concerns about high school education, respondents were asked to rate high schools in terms of providing a general education, preparation for post-secondary, and preparation for work.

The first and third of these questions were also asked of teachers in a study of their attitudes conducted in 1983. Comparisons with teachers' opinions are noted below.

1. Grading the Educational System

The actual question and responses to it were as follows:

"Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and F to denote the quality of their work. Suppose that schools were graded in the same way. What grade would you give to the schools in Manitoba?"

	A	B	C	D	F
- elementary schools	11%	48%	35%	5%	1%
- high schools	8%	34%	41%	13%	4%
- colleges and trade schools	23%	54%	20%	2%	1%
- universities	23%	46%	27%	3%	1%

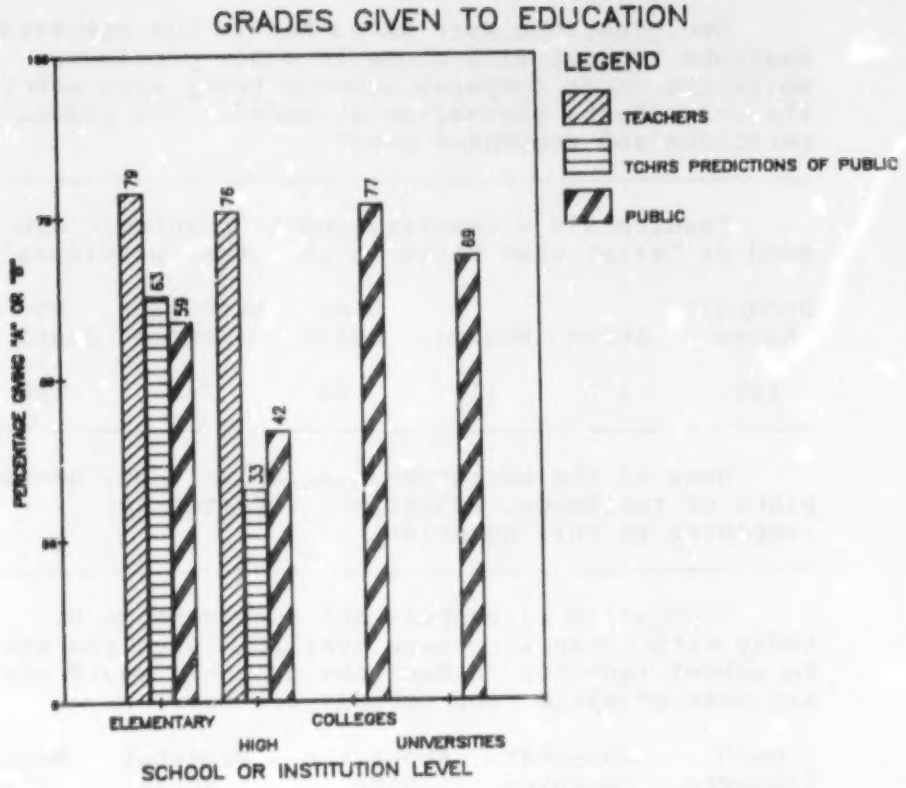
Rural residents rated high schools more positively (40% A or B vs 33% in Winnipeg).

The group of respondents defined as elementary school parents (see page 22) rated elementary schools higher than did non-parents (63% A or B vs 46% A or B). The group of respondents defined as secondary school parents rated the high schools about the same as did non-parents.

The 1983 United States Gallup Poll results were substantially lower than the Manitoba results. In the United States only 31% gave grades of A or B to local schools.

Teachers gave substantially higher grades to their own schools (about 75% A or B). However teachers made quite accurate predictions about how the public would grade elementary and secondary schools. Predictions and actual results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1



From the standpoint of the kind of support one would want for schools, these results vary. They are quite good for the post-secondary institutions, but disappointing for the public schools. To have 40-50% of the public giving elementary and high schools ratings no higher than C cannot be considered satisfactory. Moreover, the ratings seem largely unrelated to the characteristics of the respondents, such as income or education level.

On the other hand, few people give the schools failing grades (D or F). And, with the exception of high schools, there are more A and B grades given than there are C, D and F. So, while there are clearly concerns about the quality of education, there remains as well strong support for the schools.

2. Comparing Schools

Two questions were asked here. One compared Manitoba schools with those in other provinces, while the other compared schools today with schools the respondents themselves attended. The actual questions and responses were:

"Manitoba's elementary and high schools are as good or better than those in the other provinces"

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Dis-agree	Strongly Disagree	No Response
18%	42%	11%	8%	2%	19%

None of the background variables (age, gender, place of residence, education) affected the responses to this question.

"Comparing elementary and high schools of today with those that were available when you went to school (whether in Manitoba or not), would you say that education and schools are now:"

Much Improved	Somewhat Improved	About the Same	Somewhat Worse	Much Worse
22%	35%	16%	21%	6%

Rural residents and older respondents were more likely to see improvement. 60% of non-Winnipeg residents saw an improvement vs 52% of Winnipegers; exactly the same division occurred between respondents over 40 and under 40 years old respectively.

Respondents with more education were less likely to see improvement. Of those with less than full secondary education, 62% rated the schools as improved, while only 50% of those with post-secondary education did so.

Parents with children in elementary schools were more likely to give a favourable response (64% improved vs 48% for non-parents), but parents of

secondary school age students were more likely to see schools as worse than when they attended (54% improved vs 65% for non-parents).

When one adds these results to the grade results, a clearer picture of public attitudes to quality begins to emerge. While there may be concerns about quality, there is general agreement that schools in Manitoba are at least as good as those elsewhere. Moreover, about twice as many people see improvement from their own school days as see a deterioration. In support of this position, a recent poll by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Manitoba found that a majority of those polled felt that the schools were currently getting better.

Once again, the dominant impression is one of concern, but not alarm. Improvements can obviously be made, but the schools in Manitoba are not at present faced with a crisis of confidence.

3. The Role of High Schools

To understand more about the strong concerns about high school education, respondents were asked to rate the high schools in each of three areas. The question and the results were as follows:

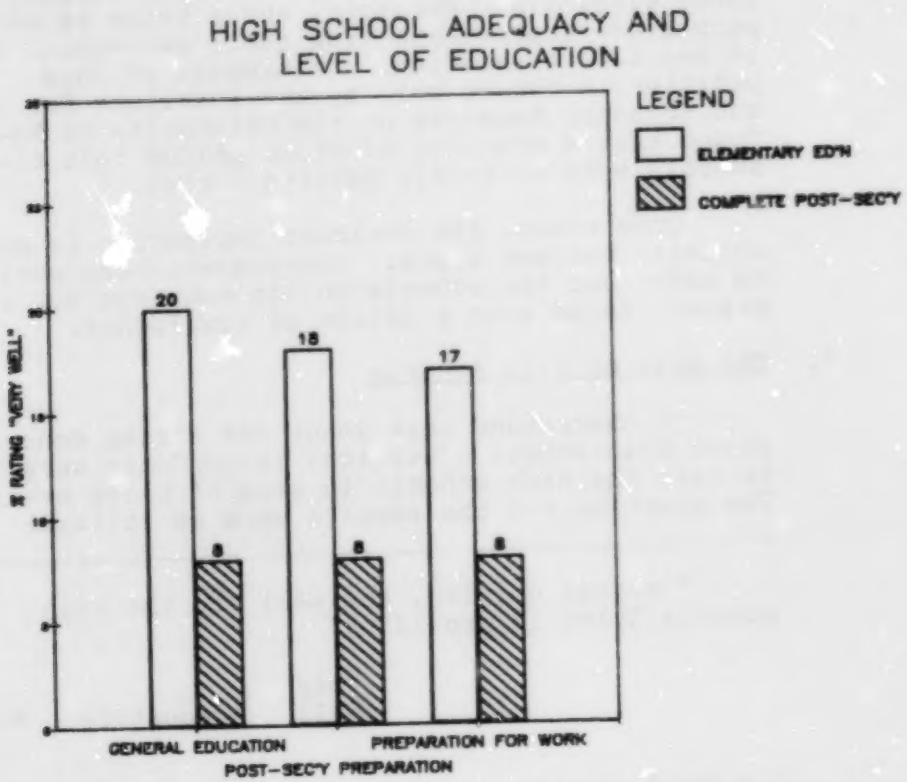
"In your opinion, how well are the high schools doing in providing"

	Very Well	Adequately	Poorly
- a good general education	15%	64%	21%
- preparation for university	15%	52%	33%
- preparation for work	10%	42%	48%

For all three aspects, rural residents tended to be more favourable in their assessments; 5-7% more non-Winnipeg residents gave ratings of "adequately" or "very well" in each area.

For all three aspects, respondents with more education tended to be less favourable in their assessments. Figure 2 illustrates some of these differences.

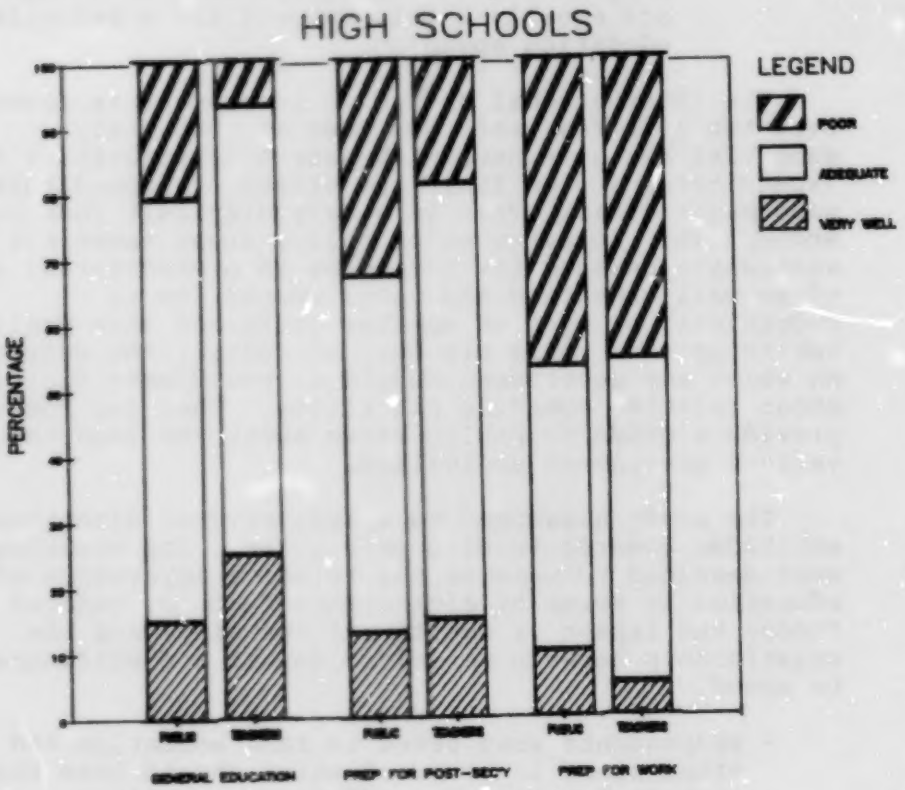
Figure 2



None of the functions is seen as being particularly well performed; each had more ratings of "poor" than "very well". Moreover, the more recent contact respondents had with education (ie. younger and more educated), the more critical they tended to be of the high schools. Clearly, however, preparation for work is the function seen as most poorly performed.

Public responses to this question are compared to teachers' responses in Figure 3.

Figure 3



There is substantial agreement among teachers and the public on these items, especially in the area of preparation for work. It is known from other research, however, that preparation for work is not ranked highly in importance as an educational goal by educators.

II. FUNDING OF EDUCATION

Summary: Education is seen as reasonably well funded at present in Manitoba. There is no public support for increased spending on education, and equally little support for a reduction in education spending.

The international crisis in government revenues over the last few years has made it absolutely essential for governments to determine priorities for expenditure, and to limit the growth of expenditures in some major areas. This is a very difficult feat to accomplish. In every major policy areas there are many worthwhile demands for increases in expenditures, and often well-organized and vocal opposition to reductions, or even to smaller increases than desired. Public opinion polls are not, of course, the only basis on which any government should or would make decisions about relative spending priorities. They do, however, provide a guide to public views about the importance of various government activities.

The study attempted to assess several dimensions of attitudes towards funding priorities. The questions were designed to measure the relative importance of education in terms of either more funds or reduced funds; the impact of additional spending; and the relationship between perceived impact and willingness to spend.

- Respondents were asked to rank education and four other areas in terms of which should have the highest priority for additional funding.
- They were asked to rank the same areas in terms of which should be the first to be reduced if necessary.
- They were asked what impact they felt additional spending would have on quality of education.
- They were asked if they would support the improvement of education even if it meant they had to pay more.

1. Priority of Funding

Respondents were asked to rank education with several other areas in terms of which area should receive more money if more were available, and which should be cut back if reductions were necessary. The question and results were:

"If you were in charge of the way that the province spends your tax dollars and for some reason you could give only one of the following areas more money next year, which would you choose?"

Five areas were listed, and were ranked by respondents in the following order:

	Chosen By
1st - Health care	29%
2nd - Incentives for business development	28%
3rd - Job training	22%
4th - Social services	11%
5th - Education	10%

Males favoured spending on development incentives; (34% vs 19% for females); females tended to give more priority to social services and health care (15% vs 6% for social services, and 31% vs 25% for health care).

Older respondents tended to give more priority to health care (41%) and less to education (5%).

Those with more education were less likely to favour spending on job training (15% of those with post-secondary vs 30% of those with elementary education), and more likely to favour development incentives (33% of post-secondary vs 17% of elementary education respondents) and education (12% vs 4% respectively).

"What about if there wasn't enough money for all the programs? If you had to pick only one area which would get less money next year, which would it be?"

	Chosen By
1st - Social services	31%
2nd - Incentives for business development	29%
3rd - Job training	20%
4th - Education	14%
5th - Health care	6%

Younger respondents were more likely to favour reducing development incentives. Of those under 40, 30% would reduce this area compared to 19% of those over 40.

These results indicate that education is not seen as a high priority either for increased or reduced support. In other words, the public perception would appear to be that education is reasonably funded at present, at least compared with other major areas.

2. Impact of Funding

Over the last decade, per pupil spending on public education in real dollars (that is, after adjusting for inflation) has risen by about 50%. At the same time, the data cited earlier on quality of education suggest that there has not been a perceived 50% increase in the quality of education. To test the public's sense of the link between spending and results, the study asked if it was felt that more spending would lead to improved education. Results were:

"If schools were given more tax dollars students would get a better education."

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
10%	22%	3%	41%	24%

Younger respondents were more likely to agree with the statement (43% of those under 25 agreed, compared with 24% of those over 40).

About two-thirds of respondents do not believe that more spending in and of itself will improve the quality of education.

3. Willingness to Pay

If more funding is not seen as leading to better education, this might affect the relative priority given to increased education funding. To attempt to assess this relationship, the study asked respondents if they would favour improving education even at the cost of higher property taxes. Results were:

"Would you approve or disapprove of improving education even if it means raising property taxes?"

Strongly Approve	Approve	Neutral	Disapprove	Strongly Disapprove
17%	39%	6%	25%	13%

Winnipeg residents and younger respondents were more likely to approve. 58% of Winnipegers agreed, compared with 51% of others. Of those under 25, 72% agreed compared with 32% of those 65 or older.

Respondents with more education were more likely to approve. 64% of post-secondary graduates agreed, compared with 39% of those with elementary school education.

The results show a clear split of opinion. A small majority would favour paying more as long as improvement resulted. This would suggest that if more funding were seen as leading to improved education, the relative priority of education as shown earlier would be higher. On the other hand, more than a third of respondents are opposed to improvements if they cost more; presumably such respondents either do not see the need for further improvement, or feel that improvement should be made within existing resources, or do not feel that more money is the answer.

How are these three sets of responses related? Those who believe more spending will improve education are somewhat, but not much, more likely to see education as the highest spending priority (16% rank it first) than are respondents as a whole (10% rank education first). However those who favour improving education even at the cost of higher property taxes are not any more prone than other respondents to rank education as the first priority (12% and 10%, respectively - an insignificant difference). In other words, oddly enough, the priority people give to funding education is not necessarily an indication that they believe such funding will improve quality; for the most part their motives for supporting education seem to lie elsewhere.

Do those who favour improving quality, even at the cost of higher taxes, also believe that more money will result in better education? Most of them do not although they are more likely to believe it than other respondents. Those wanting to improve education even at the cost of higher taxes are only marginally more likely to rank education as the highest priority for more funds (12% to 10% for other respondents), and less than half of the "improvers" believe that more funding will lead to better education (45% against 33% for the total group of respondents). Again, people's support for a position (in this case improved education) is not related very strongly to their belief in the impact or importance of more funding. All this may seem fairly confusing, but two conclusions can be drawn:

- neither the desire nor the willingness to provide more money for education is based on a strong belief that more money will result in children receiving a better education; and,

- believing that more money will improve education does not necessarily lead to supporting greater funding for education.

III. SPECIAL PROGRAMS

Summary: There is strong public support for new initiatives in the areas of Heritage Language and sex education. There is strong public support for programs for special needs students, but widespread ignorance about the current status of such programs.

There is constant pressure on the educational system to create additional programs for specific purposes. Because new programs have a cost attached to them (at the minimum, the cost is that other new programs are not created in their place), it is important to have some sense of public views about them. In addition, new programs are often proposed by a particular interest group or segment of the population. It is then useful to know whether there is general support for such initiatives.

The study sought to assess public opinion towards several areas of program emphasis in the Department of Education currently. These included:

- Heritage Language programs
- Sex education
- Special needs programs

1. Heritage Language Programs

Heritage Language programs involve the teaching of languages other than French or English. Several other languages are presently taught in Manitoba schools and supported by the Department of Education; these include German, Portugese, Pilipino, Ukranian, Hebrew, and others. In addition, there are bilingual programs in German, Ukranian, and Hebrew, in which half the school day is in English, and the other half in the other language. These programs are presently options which a local school division may choose to offer.

The question asked and responses to it were as follows:

"There has been some talk that schools should offer courses to teach languages other than just English or French to children who want to learn them. Would you be in favour of your local schools offering courses in other languages"

- during regular school hours	52%
- only if offered after regular school hours	35%
- not offering such courses at all	13%

Rural residents were more likely not to want such courses at all (16% vs 10% of Winnipegers).

Younger respondents were more likely to favour courses during school hours (61% of those under 25 vs 41% of those over 40).

These responses were very similar to those given to the same question by teachers.

2. <u>Sex Education</u>

The new Manitoba Health Curriculum contains optional units on Family Life Education which aroused some controversy when first released. Respondents in the study were asked two questions on this issue.

"Would you say that you strongly approve, moderately approve, moderately disapprove or strongly disapprove of the government providing sex education courses in schools?"

Strongly Approve	Approve	Neutral	Disapprove	Strongly Disapprove
29%	45%	4%	12%	8%

Winnipeg residents and younger respondents were more likely to approve (77% vs 68% for others).

Younger respondents were also more likely to approve - 83% of those under 40, but only 50% of those over 65. Respondents with more education were more likely to approve - 80% of post-secondary graduates vs 50% of those with elementary school education.

"Teaching of sex education in schools would make the problem of teenage pregnancies worse than it is now."

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6%	8%	4%	40%	42%

These results show strong support for the teaching of sex education in schools, with only a small minority believing that sex education will create, rather than alleviate, problems. A recent study conducted by the University of Manitoba, Institute for Social and Economic Research, asked a similar question about sex education, and found even higher levels of public support (more than 85%).

3. Special Needs Programs

The Department of Education provides some $35 million annually for the provision of educational programs for exceptional students. The study sought to assess public knowledge about these programs, views about their quality, and opinion about how important such programs are.

"Do you know whether the schools in your area provide extra programs or services for:

	Yes, They do	No, They Don't	Don't Know
- students who are handicapped or disabled in some way	44%	13%	43%
- exceptionally bright or gifted students	21%	29%	50%

Winnipeg residents were more likely to say they did not know (58% vs 28% of other respondents for handicapped programs, and 58% vs 41% for gifted programs).

"How necessary do you think it is that schools offer such services"

	Very	Moderately	Not Very	Not At All
- disabled or handicapped	70%	26%	3%	1%
- bright or gifted	43%	28%	14%	5%

Winnipeg residents (81% vs 75% of others) and respondents with more education (85% of post-secondary graduates vs 64% of those with elementary education) were more likely to view programs for gifted students as necessary.

"At the present time, how well do you feel that your local schools are meeting the needs of"

	Well	Moderately	Not Very Well	Not at All Well	No Response
- disabled or handicapped	14%	34%	12%	8%	32%
- bright or gifted	7%	27%	15%	11%	40%

Respondents saw more programs for handicapped students than for gifted students being available, and felt that the schools were more successfully meeting the needs of the handicapped. At the same time, programs for gifted students were not given quite as high a priority as were programs for handicapped or disabled children, so the perceived difference in availability of programs is in line

with public perceptions of need. Support for programs for the gifted is strong, but support for programs for handicapped students is practically unanimous. There would not appear to be support for diverting attention from the latter to the former.

The results suggest, also, that schools need to do more to inform the public about the wide range of special programs already available in Manitoba. It is noteworthy that about half the respondents did not know whether their local schools had such programs, irrespective of the respondents' age, level of education, or degree of contact with the educational system. (Those with nobody in the household attending school were only somewhat less likely to respond that they did not know - 35-40% rather than 50-60%).

IV. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Summary: There is strong support for increased public involvement in education.

The Department of Education has taken several steps over the last few years to promote public involvement in educational decisions. Respondents in the study were asked their views on this issue.

"Local residents should be given more say in how their schools are run"

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
43%	38%	3%	13%	3%

Non-Winnipeg respondents were more likely to agree with the statement (83% agreed vs 76% in Winnipeg).

Clearly, there is very strong public support for a larger public role in the schools. Teachers, on the other hand, tended to see the present level of public involvement as adequate (60% gave that response), with less than a third favouring a greater public role. And, of considerable interest, school principals were even less likely to favour increased public involvement in running the schools (15% responded in favour). There appears, then, to be some inconsistency between public desire for a stronger role, and the view of educators that the present role is appropriate. The views of school trustees on this matter are not known.

V. POST-SECONDARY ACCESSIBILITY AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

Summary: Most Manitobans believe that there is presently good accessibility to post-secondary education. There is a large demand for adult education, concentrated among those who are already most affluent and educated.

The Department of Education has a number of programs and policies in effect, and has just introduced others, to promote accessibility of post-secondary education to all Manitobans who could benefit from it. Respondents were asked whether accessibility is perceived to be a problem.

"Anyone who wants to go to college or university in Manitoba can do so regardless of how rich or poor they are"

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
38%	35%	2%	15%	10%

Males were more likely to agree (76% vs 68% of females). There were no differences in response by age, residence, or level of education.

The large majority of respondents believe that accessibility to post-secondary already exists if the motivation is there. However having a quarter of the respondents indicate that accessibility is not a reality is a serious concern, since accessibility is by definition a matter of access for all, not just for most.

1. Continuing Education

Adult and continuing education is a growing field within education. The study sought to assess the potential demand for adult education in Manitoba.

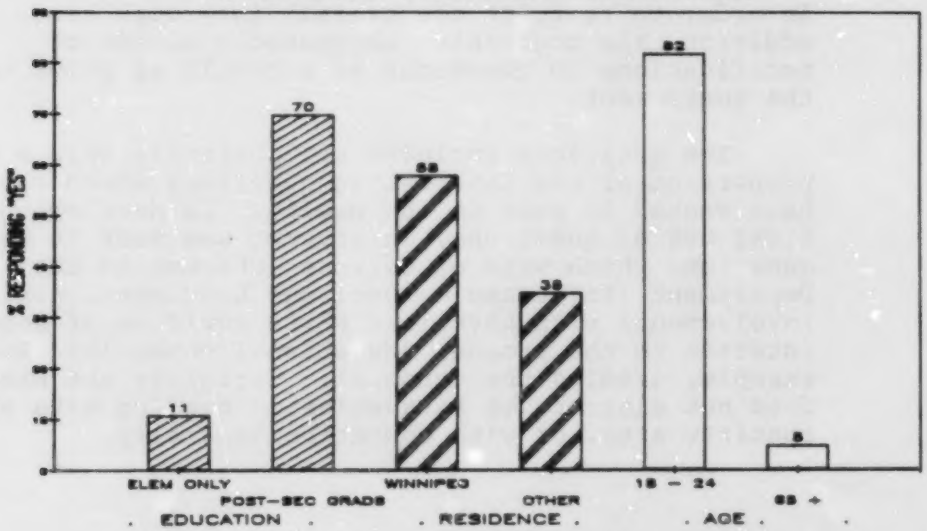
"Do you expect to take any further education or training yourself within the next five years?

Yes - 47% No - 50% No response - 3%

Responses to the question were very unequally distributed. As the chart below shows, demand for adult education is strongest among those with more education already, among younger respondents, among those living in Winnipeg, and among males. These results are consistent with other studies of demand for continuing education.

Figure 4

INTENDING FURTHER EDUCATION



If left to its own devices, then, adult education will concentrate on those who are already advantaged in educational terms. It may be important for policy in adult education to work to correct this imbalance so that more programs and opportunities will be available for those who are likely to have greater needs.

VI. METHOD

The study was based on 1013 telephone interviews conducted in early January, 1984, by a private survey research company. Telephone interviewing was chosen because it offers a guaranteed number of responses, excellent randomization, reasonable cost, and quick turnaround time. Random digit dialing was used - a procedure in which every telephone number in Manitoba has an equal chance of being selected as part of the sample. Interviewers were all trained, and were instructed to interview the person over 18 in the household whose birthday would occur next in the year (in order to ensure that the respondents were randomly divided among males and females, and among heads of households and other family members or persons living in each household).

The questions for the study were developed initially by the Planning and Research Branch. They were reviewed by senior Department of Education management, and by staff in Executive Council. Some of the questions originally on the list were later deleted in order to restrict the overall interview time. In addition, the contractor suggested a number of modifications to questions as a result of pilot testing the instrument.

The questions included are obviously only a small proportion of the interesting questions which one might have wanted to pose to the public. In developing the final set of questions, an attempt was made to balance questions which were of current interest to the Department (for example, Heritage Languages, public involvement) with questions which would be of general interest to the broader educational community (for example, grading the schools). Certainly the study does not claim to be exhaustive in dealing with any specific area, or with education generally.

1. Characteristics of Respondents

Respondents were asked to provide some basic demographic data - age group, gender, level of education, occupation, and income. Region of residence was known from the telephone exchanges. Information on the respondents is shown below.

Total = 1013

Gender:	Male 49%	Female 51%
Age:	18-24 - 17%	25-39 - 49%
	40-64 - 32%	65+ - 11%
Region:	Winnipeg 50%	Other 50%
Education:	Elementary 9%	
	Some secondary 30%	
	Complete secondary 26%	
	Some post-secondary 15%	
	Complete post-secondary 19%	
Income:	$10,000 - 13%	$10-20,000 - 30%
	$20-30,000 - 26%	$30,000+ - 31%
Occupation:	Managerial/Professional 16%	
	Homemaker 17%	
	Sales/service 12%	
	Resource industries 10%	
	Clerical 9%	
	Other 36%	

The respondents are similar to the Manitoba population as a whole. However the sample does tend to overrepresent those with higher incomes and education levels, and those between 25 and 39 years of age. In addition, age, education, and income are all correlated with each other among respondents. For example, older respondents tend to be less educated, rural, and have lower incomes; more educated respondents tend to be younger, urban, and have higher incomes.

2. Contact with the Educational System

Respondents were also asked whether anyone in the household was presently attending school or university. Because the respondents were not necessarily heads of household, it was not possible to create a subset of parents of school children directly. As a proxy measure, two sub-samples were created, however.

- Those reporting an elementary student in the household, and who were aged 25 to 39 (N = 179) were considered as parents of elementary students and compared with 228 respondents of the same age with no student present.

- Those reporting a secondary student in the household, and who were aged 40-64 (N = 90) were considered as parents of secondary students and compred with 233 respondents aged 40-64 with no student present.

Although these are not ideal indicators, it was felt important to have some way of assessing differences in attitudes between parents and others. Such differences are noted in the report.

3. A Note on Public Surveys

All survey results must be read with a certain degree of caution. Public polling has developed a high level of technical sophistication over the past few decades. Techniques to produce high response rates, corrections for response bias, sampling procedures - all have been sharpened to the point that national polls (such as Gallup) are often remarkably accurate based on 1000 or so people across the whole country.

On the other hand, surveys of this kind also have their limitations. They occasionally produce results which are inaccurate. In the case of elections, we find out later whether a poll was right or not. In the case of studies such as this one, there is no way to verify the results, even though they are likely to have considerable accuracy.

A more important limitation has to do with questions. Polls are most reliable when questions are simple and straightforward. The more complicated the question - and equally, the more complicated the issue - the more problems polling results are likely to have. One should be cautious in using the results of surveys to drawn conclusions about complicated social issues.

The questions asked are also important. There is no doubt that the nature of the question influences the answer. Simply turning a question from a positive to a negative, for instance, can have a dramatic effect on the results. It is important, therefore, to remember that poll results represent the answers to a specific set of questions, and cannot necessaribly be taken as the answers to other, similar questions. In this study, an attempt was made to ask several questions on important issues so that there would be cross-checks on the overall climate of public opinion.

Finally, the reader should be reminded that the results of a survey represent opinion, not fact. What people believe is not necessarily true; one would not want to assume that because a majority believe something it is therefore the reality. Equally, although democratic governments obviously must pay attention to public opinion, it is by no means the case that they must obey it. There is no suggestion in this report that the results of this, or any other attitude study, should be binding on government. The results should be considered in terms of what they reveal about public opinion, and how trends in public opinion might suggest directions for educational policy.